relied upon by EPA." Although disavowing an opinion on EPA's proposed rule, Chafee said "any policy maker would find [the report contains] enough information...to make a scientifically justified decision to regulate radon in drinking water."

On 24 August Loehr answered that the board was simply trying to give EPA information "that has the least uncertainty and best scientific basis." As McClellan explained, "I didn't have any particular ax to grind—we just called it as we saw it."

EPA officials are now preparing a reply to the McClellan report. Jim Elder, director of the water office, says EPA is revising the report to respond to SAB's concerns. "When you take this piece of data and that piece of data and put it all together, you end up drawing conclusions that look more sound than you intended them to," says Elder. "We're admitting it wasn't perfect," he says.

In the meantime, Congress once again has interceded: Last week, the Senate appropriations committee passed an amendment to EPA's 1994 budget that would delay until October 1994 the implementation of EPA's proposed MCL for radon. The legislation came from Senator Bob Kerrey (D–NE), who argued that the cost of installing equipment in Nebraska water systems to remove radon "would accomplish practically nothing." The amendment, he said in a statement, "gives the federal government more time to evaluate compelling scientific evidence which casts serious doubt on the need for the new regulation."

Kerrey's amendment "would give EPA the breathing room to reconsider its proposed standard," says a Senate staffer. And some more pressure on EPA to rethink its radon policy is in the offing: *Science* has learned that the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) plans later this month to release a report called "Research on Health Risk Assessment" that criticizes EPA's radon policy. Like many observers of the radon saga, the authors of the OTA report view EPA's troubles with water-borne radon as a symptom of the agency's problems in translating its science base to policy—problems Browner has pledged to fix without saying how.

–Richard Stone

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

White House Seeks Uniform Policy

The Clinton Administration has sent the two leading science agencies back to the drawing board in search of a single, government-wide policy on financial conflicts of interest by federally funded researchers. White House officials have asked the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) to rewrite proposals that have been years in the making, with the goal of developing one set of regulations that apply to any researcher, regardless of the source of funding.

The new plan, spearheaded by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), would reconcile differences in current draft regulations written by NSF and NIH. It would jettison NSF's proposal to require institutions to inform the funding agency of the financial holdings of every federally funded researcher as well as NIH's plan to collect such information only for those whose holdings exceed a certain level. The new guidelines would give institutions the authority to review all financial holdings and resolve any potential conflicts before submitting grant proposals, and to certify to the funding agency that they have done so. Each agency would conduct random audits to ensure that the policy is working.

The new policies, if adopted, would mark a change for both agencies. NIH, in its latest draft, had intended to ask institutions to clear with the agency any instance in which an investigator held stock valued at more than $50,000 in a company related to his or her research. The draft, written as a formal rule that has gone through more than a dozen incarnations over the past 5 years (including the release and subsequent retraction of one version), has not yet been published for public comment.

NSF was closer to issuing a final policy. The agency has already published a version for public comment in which it proposed to review grant requests internally for potential conflict, based on financial disclosures supplied by the individual applicants. But NSF received hundreds of letters from researchers and institutions objecting to the effort needed to satisfy such a detailed reporting requirement. In response, the agency has revised its policy to allow institutions to certify their own investigators as conflict-free.

Both agencies submitted their proposed drafts for Administration clearance earlier this year with the hope of publishing them in September. But last month OMB, with OSTP's prodding, decided instead to revisit the entire conflict issue and called in officials from both agencies. Armed with new marching orders, NSF and NIH officials are rewriting their versions of the guidelines to conform to one another and to the outlines of the proposed common federal policy.

This process is being hailed by research organizations such as the Association of American Medical Colleges as a long-needed clarification of federal conflict policies and a simplification of the reporting requirements for individual scientists. Under the proposal, researchers would typically disclose their financial holdings only to their own institutions, which would review them and resolve any potential problems before certifying to funding agencies that they have done so. Agency officials are likewise pleased with the idea of uniform policies, says NSF associate general counsel Miki Leder.

The initial reaction from Congress was generally positive. Steve Jennings, an aide to Representative Ron Wyden (D–OR), says that the broad outline of institutional screening backed by federal oversight "is a vast improvement over what we have now—which is nothing." Jennings, who investigated research conflict of interest in the course of taking the Scripps Research Institution to task for a proposed $300 million agreement that would have given Sandoz Corp. first rights to NIH-funded research at Scripps, says NIH must still set some clear guidelines on what constitutes a potential conflict. But once that is done, he says, "it makes more sense for NIH to monitor each institution than to monitor [the financial holdings of] each and every grant recipient."

The revised rules are expected to be issued around the end of the year and serve as a model for future conflict-of-interest rules issued by any agency that awards research grants. This schedule could push NIH past a 7 December deadline imposed by Congress in legislation passed this spring. But NIH officials believe the delay is a fair tradeoff for a government-wide conflict policy and they do not expect trouble from Congress.

But even as the top two research agencies join hands on a common policy, at least one other agency is heading off in quite a different direction. Last week, the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) science advisory board recommended that the agency develop conflict-of-interest rules requiring full financial disclosure by individual investigators whose research data is submitted as part of an application for FDA drug or product approval. FDA hopes to issue draft regulations covering such research later this year; research that FDA itself funds would fall under the NIH rule, which will apply to all research sponsored by the Public Health Service.

FDA's harder line on clinical research, agency officials and congressional staffers say, reflects the fact that it, unlike NSF and NIH, is a regulatory agency that must protect the public from the consequences of a scientist testing a product in which he or she holds a financial interest. "FDA is going to have to make material judgments on the basis of data submitted by these researchers," says Jennings. "It's a matter of public health, and that ratchets up the level of oversight needed."

–Christopher Anderson